In August 1619, a ship docked at Point Comfort, Virginia. Its cargo gave shape to what would become the economic, political, juridical, social and cultural life in America. Four hundred years ago, the colonies received their first slaves and American capitalism made a historical turn based on the brutal exploitation of people whose life was valued as less than human. Society, and not only American society but the whole world, needs to come to terms on what it means to be human and how to treat another person as a human being. It is evident that at the source of any social upheaval and humanitarian crisis there is cruelty, greed, and power-grabbing. It is calculated that 12.5 million Africans were forcibly shipped to the New World between 1525 and 1866,[[1]](#footnote-1) just as there are today 40.3 million victims of human trafficking,[[2]](#footnote-2) and 70.8 million refugees[[3]](#footnote-3) worldwide. It is evident to the honest student of history that the humanitarian crisis goes back decades and that military and economic imperialism is to be blamed.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Our first reading from the prophet Isaiah ([58:9b-14](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=333068963)) seems to make two dramatic demands of the ancient Israelites—and, by extension, of us: do justice to your neighbor and worship Yahweh with honesty!

First of all, do justice. Love of God and neighbor go hand in hand. Anything less than that is just a joke and a hoax we try to perpetrate on God. ​It’s like saying to God: “We’ll give You worship​ on Sunday ​and You just mind Your own business from Monday through Saturday. Your place is the church; stay out of our workplaces and our voting stations. You’re the God of religion, not politics or economics. And God laughs. ​If you want to worship me,​ God says, ​you’re going to have to learn to care about what I care about. And as the Bible never tires of telling us, God cares about the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden. If they don’t matter to us, then God doesn’t really matter to us either. That’s what Isaiah’s saying.

God wants us to fight injustice (“unlock the fetters of wickedness”) and to respond to others with kindness (“share your bread”). A society worthy of God would consider the mistreatment of the helpless and the vulnerable an abomination; a society that disdains the poor and victimizes the victim is a godless society, regardless of its church attendance rates, its religious talk, and the multiplication of its prayers at the time of a crisis.[[5]](#footnote-5) A community that seeks justice and worships God ensures that no one lacks for food to nourish them, shelter to protect them, or clothing to keep them warm (Isaiah 58:7). A community that points the finger in disdain and sees the suffering and despair of human beings as a burden and a problem to shield itself from is a godless, fearful, greedy, and insensitive community. Where there is derision may we bring compassion.

Isaiah reminds us that if the people want to find favor in the eyes of God, they must engage in massive social reform. To serve God authentically is to make sure that we create an environment of prosperity for generations to come. It is “to share your bread with the hungry, and to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to ignore your own kin” (v. 6-7). It is tempting to dismiss those who suffer as fundamentally different from us; Isaiah and the rest of the Bible puts a stop to that pretense and remind us *we are they and they are we*. (Deuteronomy 15 insistently refers to the poor person as “your brother.”) Only when Israel pays attention to the neighbors in need and restore their stolen humanity, will Israel’s light again “burst like the dawn” and will it again be showered with blessing (v. 9f).

Isaiah’s second challenge is for people to commit more deeply and more genuinely to the observance of Shabbat. “If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your affairs in My holy day; if you call the Sabbath ‘delight,’ the Lord’s day ‘honored’... then you can seek the favor of the Lord” (v. 13-14). The true and honest observance of Shabbat helps us to examine our identity and life choices in relation to God and neighbor. The way we relate to our neighbor shows the regard we have for God and, vice-versa the love we have for God must be evident in the way we care for those who suffer. How we treat others is in a sense how we treat God. “One who oppresses the poor taunts his Maker,” says the book of Proverbs; “one who shows compassion for the poor honors [God]” (Proverbs 14:31).

The foundational spiritual question for us is this: Does one’s life give any evidence of an encounter with God? When we’ve experienced union and intimacy with the divine, what is our response? Honest worship goes hand in hand with care of neighbor and of God’s creation. Are we different from our surroundings, or do we continue reflecting the predictable cultural fears and biases of our times?[[6]](#footnote-6)

Let’s worship God with honesty of heart and do good to all in need. Amen.

1. <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/how-many-slaves-landed-in-the-us/>; <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/what-human-trafficking/human-trafficking/victims> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/refugees> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://hmh.org/search/guatemala>; <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/reasons-why-people-become-refugees/>; <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/4972/what-history-tells-us-about-the-refugee-crisis>; <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/ethnicity-and-refugees-africa> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Isaiah 1:15-16; Matthew 6:5-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Angelina Jolie, The Border Crisis needs humanity, not fear. TIME magazine, August 26, 2019, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)